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SUBJECT: DELHI DIARY, JUNE 20-27

Classified By: A/PolCouns Joel Ehrendreich for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (U) Below is a compilation of political highlights from Embassy New Delhi for June 20-27, 2007 that did not feature in our other reporting, including:

-- KK Katyal: Potential for South Asian Parliament
-- Tawang Residents Speak Out Against China's Territorial Claims
-- Controversy Continues to Surround UPA Presidential Hopeful
-- Maharashtran Hindu Right, Shiv Sena Backs Congress Presidential Candidate

KK Katyal: Potential for South Asian Parliament

¶2. (U) KK Katyal, president of the South Asia Free Media Association (SAFMA), met with Poloff to discuss SAFMA's efforts to facilitate the establishment of a South Asian Parliament (SAP). Katyal stated that while SAFMA has made significant progress in cultivating interest in such a body across all eight South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) member states, he expects it will take 10) 15 years for a SAP to materialize in any meaningful way.

¶3. (U) Katyal described to Poloff the two-pronged mission of SAFMA: to facilitate greater freedom in movement and dissemination of people, ideas, and materials associated with the media, and to push for region-wide political change to that effect. The latter objective grew from consensus among SAFMA members that the current political situation in the region impinges on the freedom of the media; accordingly, SAFMA resolved to &throw its weight behind regional cooperation, peace, and the rule of law.8 SAFMA's ongoing efforts to promote the establishment of a SAP are a cornerstone of this policy.

¶4. (U) SAFMA has convened two meetings in the past three years of 70) 80 members of parliament (MPs) hailing from all eight SAARC states. Katyal stressed that SAFMA had asked the heads of every major political party in their respective countries to designate which MPs would serve as delegates) the implication being that the attending MPs participated with the consent and support of their party leadership and constituency. Katyal noted that SAFMA is aware that it is

presently unrealistic to form a SAP; nonetheless, SAFMA is pushing for increased and continuous contact between the various MPs, and couching all its remarks in support of the long-term goal of establishing a SAP. According to Katyal, the response has been unanimously positive, and progress is being made, albeit in cautious, incremental steps. Katyal observed that while SAFMA would ideally like to take a back seat, the parliamentary figures at this point seem unwilling or unable to lead the initiative; SAFMA therefore remains the primary driver of the effort. Katyal concluded by noting South Asia's relative homogeneity, which he identified as conducive to eventual extensive cooperation, and by emphasizing his optimism that in the long-term a functioning SAP will improve the problem solving capacity of SAARC member states by acting as a consultative and deliberative body.

15. (SBU) Comment: SAFMA reasons that active interaction between SAARC member MPs in the form of a SAP will be conducive to a region-wide free media, and lead to more transparent and effective governance in general. A SAP could also be a positive force for resolving existing bilateral problems amongst SAARC states, and for obviating future ones. Furthermore, it could provide a convenient, consolidated forum for USG lobbying efforts and interaction between US members of Congress and their South Asian counterparts. However, SAFMA aside, there is no significant support for the SAP concept among our regular Indian contacts, nor would we expect there to be while India plays such a dominating role in most of its regional bilateral relationships. For now, SAARC will play the role of regional integrating body for the few instances the region does want to work together. Katyal's expectation that there could be a SAP in the 10-15 year timeframe seems very optimistic. End Comment.

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Tawang Residents Speak Out Against China's Territorial Claims

16. (C) The 25 June "Times of India" ran five articles which refuted China's claims on Tawang District. China claims 90,000 square kilometers of Arunachal Pradesh including Tawang district and its 400 year-old Tibetan shrine where the sixth Dalai Lama was born. According to the articles, the Monpas, a Tibetan ethnic tribe that comprises ninety-seven percent of the population, have mainstreamed into Indian society and consider themselves to be irrevocably Indian. Secretary of the Galden Namgyal Lhatse Gonpha shrine Sangay

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Jampu avers, "not a single soul in Tawang will ever support China. Considering Chinese atrocities in Tibet, we can never associate ourselves with them. We belong to India. It respects religious and individual rights." The different peoples of Tawang have adopted Hindi as the "lingua franca," town landmarks are named after the great Indian leaders, and boast a fellow Mon as the new Chief Minister Arunachal Pradesh state. However, the Tawang populace is not very happy with the central government, as many worry about the absence of quick GOI reactions to counter China's claims.

17. (C) The Indian press has locked on to the boundary dispute with renewed vigor since Foreign Minister Yang's comments on the sidelines of the June G-8 Summit that the "mere presence" of populated areas will not affect Chinese territorial claims (ref NEW DELHI 2866). It is pressuring the GOI to come out more forcefully in public to refute China's assertions at a time when the GOI prefers to let sleeping dogs lie.

Controversy Continues to Surround UPA Presidential Hopeful

18. (U) On June 25, speaking at a conference organized by the religious sect Brahma Kumari, UPA Presidential hopeful Pratibha Patil spoke of a divine premonition delivered to her by the sect's dead leader. Through a medium, the "Baba" as

the leader is referred to, purportedly spoke of "greater responsibilities coming her way," after which, Patil claims Sonia Gandhi called regarding the Presidential post.

¶9. (U) In 1932, Lekhraj Khubechand Kirpalani, a retired business man from Kolkata established the religious sect, which teaches that the world is approaching a time of great calamities, suffering, and war. The followers maintain a disciplined way of life and believe that God shared Kirpalani's body while he lived on earth. Their followers span 66 countries and the sect claims a membership of over 400,000. The Kumaris are now more a movement, with established universities, hospitals, and efforts to empower women and develop sustainable energy. They have been recognized for their efforts by the UN and awarded a Peace Medal and six Peace Messenger Awards. The group is also affiliated as a non-governmental organization with the Economic and Social Council of the UN and UNICEF.

¶10. (C) Comment: The lastest gaffe for Patil left Congress and its allies stunned by her remark and apparent beliefs that border on the superstitious. Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) General Secretary, Prakash Karat, retorted to press inquiries that support from CPI-M was not conditional based on an atheist candidate. As the Opposition NDA continues its mud slinging campaign, accusing Patil of shady involvement in a failed bank cooperative and leveling murder charges against her relatives, she is making her road to Rashtrapati Bhavan (the President's House) a bit bumpier yet more entertaining than the usual stolid contest. End Comment.

Maharashtran Hindu Right, Shiv Sena Backs Congress Presidential Candidate

¶11. (U) Breaking from its NDA ally, on June 25, the Shiv Sena announced it would support UPA candidate Pratibha Patil, a fellow Maharashtran in her bid for President. The decision

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sent tremors through the 21 year old partnership between the Shiv Sena, a Maharashtra-based Hindu political party, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray called the choice one between a "Hindu" or a "Marathi" (someone from Maharashtra). In the end, having the first President from Maharashtra carried more weight.

¶12. (SBU) Incensed with the Shiv Sena decision to go against the NDA candidate, current Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, the Maharashtran BJP immediately threatened to pull municipal level support from the Shiv Sena. (Note: The Shiv Sena with support from the BJP governs several municipalities in Maharashtra, including Mumbai. End Note). At its National Executive Committee meeting on June 24-25, BJP leaders expressed disappointment with the decision and said a more thorough review of the Shiv Sena/BJP partnership would take place after the Presidential election. Thackeray denied that the decision would have significant impact on the BJP/NDA relationship.

¶13. (C) Comment: In a Presidential race that is practically a sure shot for Pratibha Patil, religion, region, and gender are providing ample twists and turns for political analysts. While the support from the Hindu right wing Shiv Sena will not derail her support from secular parties, it further demonstrates the chaos within the NDA coalition (septel). End Comment.

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